

How overseas fire agencies recruit for diversity

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The number of female firefighters in the urban sector in Australia is less than five per cent, despite good efforts to broaden the catchment for recruitment. How can this be improved using best-practice recruitment?

In Australia some agencies have recruited females well but retention has been poor because of toxic cultures and outdated systems that act as barriers. In other cases, recruitment efforts have been so focused on the numbers that entry standards have been compromised and transparency of processes has been lost.

The research shared here was conducted through a Churchill Fellowship that explored opportunities for fire service recruitment to increase the number of women and the ethnic diversity of recruits within the workforce. The research looked at recruitment that attracts, retains and promotes a diverse workforce. It focused on three broad strategies: quotas, targeted recruitment and social-change programs. The research included 21 fire departments in eight countries and over 100 interviews and meetings. Included in the research were human resources doctrines and organisational policies, such as recruitment programs, maternity leave policies and other support systems.

Quotas or gender targets

The fire services that used a quota or gender target in their recruitment were the ones with the largest proportion of women. Tokyo Fire Department (6.4 per cent women) and San Francisco Fire Department (16 per cent women) have the highest statistic for operational firefighters. This can be directly attributed to 20 years of government-sanctioned quotas. The other conspicuous observation in both these departments was the normalisation of women firefighters and an inclusive culture in the fire stations. This can be attributed to the sustained and systematic inclusion of women in the workforce for over two decades.

Quotas ensure sustained and systematic recruitment of women and, over time, lead to the normalisation of female firefighters. Quotas can and should be administered without compromising performance standards. The fire services with the highest percentage of women in their ranks use quotas and gender targets.

In the Tokyo Fire Department, women do not perform all the same firefighting roles as the men. Women are prohibited by Japanese law from participating in activities that pose a risk to future child-bearing. They cannot respond to any chemical, biological or radiological incidents or participate on urban search and rescue teams.

The San Francisco Fire Department had a court-sanctioned consent decree in effect between 1988



Female recruits at the Tokyo Fire Department Academy, where the role is normalised for women due to gender targets and social change programs.

Image: Tokyo Fire Department

and 1999. This mandate was enacted after litigation against the city and county of San Francisco for illegal hiring practices. Under the decree, the San Francisco Fire Department was required to recruit women to 10 per cent of its operational workforce and for 50 per cent of those women to be of colour. This quota was successful in the increase of women, but research into the culture¹ suggests that the male majority was sometimes resentful of the women hired and promoted during this time. This created distrust, which broke down communication, team unity and overall effectiveness.

Quotas can negatively affect inclusion if they are not delivered transparently. This can erode trust and communication on which inclusive team cultures are built. Agencies should ensure robust communication and performance-management plans are in place before implementing quotas.



Bronnie Mackintosh with female firefighters of Rajasthan where a government quota is used to recruit women.

Image: Sita Khatik

Targeted recruitment

Targeted recruitment is a strategy to identify specific populations and increase their access and opportunities to being employed. It has been a standardised approach to recruitment since diversity was first recognised as a workforce need. Examples of targeted recruitment programs include women-only information and physical preparation sessions, information stands at sporting, social and community events and careers exhibitions in residential areas of target demographics. Australian fire agencies have generally adopted targeted recruitment as the default strategy for recruiting through a diversity lens. Australian fire services have had varying success with this approach.

Historically, the London Fire Brigade used positive action programs to recruit and promote women and ethnically diverse firefighters. Current Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade, Dany Cotton, is a product of their talent identification program and has been instrumental

in mentoring other female firefighters into leadership positions.

The London Fire Brigade also had a graduate program that gave a preferential pathway for firefighters entering with external qualifications. In another targeted initiative, the London Fire Brigade ran a talent development program aimed to develop people with leadership potential. People were selected for their teamwork and ability to engage with the community rather than by traditional exams used in merit selection. Although both programs were successful in identifying talent and eliminating barriers for women and cultural diversity, resistance from resentful firefighters caused issues for inclusion.

Agencies must have a specific talent identification program and be able to 'sponsor' the promotional pathway of those who consistently demonstrate a capacity for leadership. There should also be appropriate ways to performance-manage those who attempt to undermine these selections. Once again, transparent process and rigorous selection is paramount to success.

One of the more successful models of targeted recruitment in the UK, was at Staffordshire Fire and Rescue. Under the direction of the female fire chief, the Staffordshire Fire and Rescue navigated the UK austerity measures and transformed their culture to be prevention-focused while still upholding their response performance in the community. Her team worked collaboratively with other emergency services by making home fire safety and wellness checks to all homes in their jurisdiction. She employed fire prevention technicians from at-risk communities and allowed them to wear the same firefighter uniform as the response firefighters. This demonstrated that every single person in the organisation contributed something to public safety and deserved to wear the same uniform. The fire prevention officers greatly expanded the diversity mix of the workforce and were well received by the at-risk communities because of their shared language and religious beliefs. When safety risks were identified during the home checks, the fire prevention personnel would refer the person or family to the relevant authority that could resolve their risk. This built community connection with all emergency service providers, gave a platform for educating the community, addressed safety issues and linked community members with each other.

The Los Angeles Fire Department used targeted recruitment for their past two campaigns. They use strong marketing, social media and web presence, connect with the community at multiple events and provide support programs for their target groups.

¹ Krieger A 2012, *Beyond the Consent Decree: Gender and Recruitment in the San Francisco Fire Department*, National Fire Academy, San Francisco.

One of the strengths of the Los Angeles Fire Department recruitment strategy was their use of data as well as tracking candidates through the recruitment process.

Targeted recruitment requires sustained efforts to run programs tailored to a particular demographic. They should be measurable and use data systems to track individual progress as well as the impact of the program. Data analysis supports the use of specific programs.

Social-change programs

Social-change programs aim to change a social perception of firefighting for both the participant as well as their family and social network. Generally, the participants are aged between 14 and 19 and, for most fire services, are still too young to apply for recruitment. However, these programs prepare their broad-based skills, expose them to the physical and mental requirements of fire and emergency services and help them to understand what is required to get employed by a paid service.

Both the Los Angeles Fire Department and the Fire Department of the City of New York have high school and cadet programs for students aged 14 and 18. These volunteer programs are based on army cadets and taught by paid firefighters in a working fire station. Students study fire science and complete their emergency medical technician training; a prerequisite for most US fire agencies.

Girls' fire camps are also popular in the US and Canada. These camps build self-esteem and self-efficacy for girls aged between 14 and 18, through experiential activities modelled on the roles of a firefighter. They learn fire science, extinguishment, rescue operations, first aid and develop teamwork and leadership skills. The other unique outcome of these fire camps is the professional development of the volunteers who participate as instructors or crew leaders during the camp.

In a broader context, the girls' fire camps impact the greater community. Through publicity in schools, the media and connection to the local fire department, the camps contribute to a change in social beliefs and attitudes about women as firefighters. This helps disseminate information about the changing role of fire services and every person connected to a camp becomes a recruitment and fire safety conduit.

Social-change programs are necessary for normalising women firefighters. They empower young girls to overcome fear and feel great about physically demanding tasks. Even if they don't end up in fire or emergency services, these young women learn to be better community members and first responders.



Volunteer school and cadet programs provide foundation skills for teenagers considering a career in the fire service.

Image: Los Angeles Fire Department

Recommendations

Australian fire agencies could adopt quotas, targeted recruitment and social-change programs to recruit, retain and promote women and ethnic diversity within the service. Quotas increase numbers and targeted recruitment and social-change programs ensure sustainability. Without quotas or gender targets we won't see significant change. Without normalising firefighting as a role, women will continue to feel tokenistic or leave the agency. These approaches rely on agencies addressing inclusion, shifting cultures and adopting robust performance-management procedures for dealing with culture change.

Access to the full Churchill Fellowship report is at www.churchilltrust.com.au/media/fellows/Mackintosh_B_2015_Women_and_ethnically_diverse_people_in_Australian_Fire_Agencies.pdf